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PAY OF LABOR IN NEW ENGLAND COTTON MILLS

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The cotton industry in New England has undergone some marked changes during the last few years, both as regards working conditions, and the racial makeup of the help employed. For a long time the only change that manifested itself in its racial character was in the immigration of French-Canadians; large numbers of these people were brought over the Canadian border and distributed among the mills throughout New England. They proved to be a race who assimilated American ideas very rapidly, and little by little they began to take their place alongside the English-speaking people in every department of the mill, until to-day not only are they to be found in all the skilled departments, but many of them are holding official positions, such as superintendents, designers and overseers.

The last few years, however, have witnessed a great change. One may to-day enter any cotton mill of ordinary size in New England and find from six to ten different nationalities represented and working under one roof. Most of the men start in what is known as the "picker room," where the cotton is received in its raw state, and put through a carding and picking process that strips it of most of the foreign substances, such as dirt and cotton-seed shells. This is one of the unskilled departments, somewhat unhealthy on account of the large amount of dust and loose cotton fiber that is whirled around while the cotton is passing through the carding and picking machines which do their work in a manner almost human. Here one will find Polanders, Portuguese from the Western Islands, Italians, Armenians, Scandinavians and Sicilians, with a small sprinkling of English-speaking operatives.

This department is the kindergarten for the foreigners. Wages are low, ranging from \$5.00 to about \$8.00 per week, many of the men having to support large families on this meagre income. As a rule, they live in the cheapest tenements they can get, sometimes two or three families living together. All these nationalities have

been slow in assimilating American ideas, or becoming in any way Americanized; they live in a frugal manner, are of a clanish disposition, generally settling in colonies of their own wherever possible, and show no desire whatever to "mix in" with any other class of people. The Portuguese are somewhat different from the rest of those mentioned in some respects. There is a mistaken idea in many quarters that these people are direct from Portugal, such, however, is not the case, as they come from the Western Islands. They are a great deal better adapted to agricultural pursuits, which many of them adopt whenever the opportunity presents itself, as they have a natural leaning in that direction.

As the women and children of these foreign-born operatives cannot go into the picker room, they are distributed through the other departments; the women generally being given work not requiring very much skill, while the children are employed as "bobbin boys," "doffers," or "sweepers," either helping to bring in the material which is going through the process of manufacturing, or carrying it away from one department to the other. The women make about the same wages as the men, while the children range from \$2.75 to \$5.00 per week. They work fifty-eight and sixty hours per week like the adults.

The foreign operatives are slowly beginning to make their presence felt in other departments of the mill where more skill is required, and, while it will be a long time before they can be considered as on a level with the English-speaking operatives, nevertheless, the bringing in of these different nationalities, many of them from parts of Europe and the Western Islands where textile manufacturing is unknown, has had the inevitable effect of keeping down the standard of the whole industry so far as wages, hours of labor, and working conditions are concerned. Unacquainted with the manners and customs of our country, unable even in many instances to understand or speak our language, they have not taken, nor can they be expected to take, any active part in the social unrest and constant agitation of the older employees for shorter hours and better wages.

In spite of these obstacles, the conditions in the cotton mills of New England have constantly been changing for the better. The respective state legislatures have enacted laws from time to time for the protection of the women workers, the raising of the age standard for children, and the shortening of the working week. In the pas-

sage of humane labor laws, Massachusetts has continuously been in the lead, but she will now have to look to her laurels, as Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Maine and Vermont are waking up. Rhode Island has cut down the hours of labor from sixty to fifty-eight per week, New Hampshire followed suit, Maine and Vermont are still working on a sixty-hour schedule, but it is confidently expected that both these states will see the advisability of getting on a more equal footing with the other states, especially as Massachusetts will be working under a fifty-six-hour law for women and minors after January 1, 1910, this law having been enacted in the 1908 session of the state legislature.

Manufacturers themselves are beginning to realize that the hours of labor must be reduced. The speed of machinery in cotton mills has been increased to a tremendous extent during the last few years, and under these conditions it must be acknowledged by everybody, uninfluenced by mercenary motives, that for women and children to be compelled to work under a strong mental strain, in an atmosphere charged with steam and cotton fiber, for ten and ten and a half hours per day (which they do for five days in the week in order to have a few hours more leisure at the end of the week) is, to say the least, a reflection on our twentieth century civilization. We say that eight hours per day is long enough for our government employees to work, we pass state and municipal laws prohibiting such employees from working more than eight hours per day. Yet we sit supinely by and see thousands of wan-faced women standing wearily at the loom for ten long hours per day, in an atmosphere loaded down with heat and steam; and, what is worse still, thousands of children just entering their teens are compelled to work under these same conditions, the same number of hours, and for a miserable pittance of a few dollars per week, in order to meet the living expenses of the family, which the meagre wages of the father will not meet. While some headway has been made in the skilled departments, in raising the wage standard, yet when we consider the great increase in the speed of machinery, and the larger amount produced by the cotton operative to-day as compared with ten or fifteen years ago, the workman's share of the gain appears small.

Some changes have also taken place in the class of cotton goods manufactured in the New England mills during the last few years. We have been gradually drifting into a finer grade of goods, requir-

ing more skill on the part of the operative than was necessary when manufacturing the coarser grade. The principal reason for this change can be found in the large number of spindles that are now being operated in the southern states. Nearly all the southern product comes into direct competition with the class of goods which was formerly manufactured here in New England, but which we are gradually getting away from. Many of the older mills in New England have discarded the system of "mule-spinning," having their thread spun on the machines which are termed "mules," and have adopted the "ring-spinning frames" in their stead. There are several reasons why this change has been brought about; in the first place, it is possible to operate a larger number of ring spindles in a given space than can be operated with the "mule-spinning" machine, the latter machine taking up almost one-half more space. This is an important item in an old mill where room is at a discount. Another reason given is the fact that the mule-spinning is all done by men, whose work is rated as skilled. The mule-spinners are a well-organized body, their organization dating as far back as 1858, when they were first brought here from Lancashire, England. Ring-spinning is all done by girls and young women, whose average wages are from \$5.00 to \$8.00 per week, while the wages of a mule-spinner range from \$12.00 to \$20.00 in the very fine goods mills. The yarns spun on a ring frame are admittedly not of so good a texture as those spun on the mule machines, nevertheless they are found suitable for cloth of a coarse or medium grade. On the other hand, most of the successful mills which are engaged in the manufacture of the finer grade of cotton fabrics spin practically all their "filling yarn," the cross thread constituting the face of cloth, on mule machines operated by men.

I have always maintained that the standard of wages of cotton mill help is too low; take for instance the weavers. The average wage of weavers runs from \$8.00 to \$10.00 per week, while some here and there earn probably as high as \$12.00 per week. These weavers operate from four looms on the finer grades to as many as twenty, and, in a few cases, twenty-four looms on coarser work. These latter are "draper looms" or, what is termed by the trade, the "Northrop looms." There are thousands of men and many women who are compelled to provide for a family on the wages quoted above. We can imagine the task they are confronted with when we

realize that, while their wages are no higher to-day than they were five years ago, the cost of living has increased at the very least forty per cent. It is small wonder that the children of these parents are compelled to enter the mills as soon as they are allowed to do so by law. I know from experience that many of these parents would much prefer to keep on sending their children to school, in order to acquire a better education than they themselves were able to get; but they are face to face with the stern reality, that the father who ought to be the breadwinner of the family, is not receiving a living American wage. I have often wondered why manufacturers did not see the wisdom of getting together and devising ways and means whereby the whole wage standard of textile workers could be elevated and placed on a scale that would encourage our people willingly to put their sons and daughters into the industry, instead of doing it as a matter of necessity, as is usually the case to-day. I cannot but feel they would be well rewarded for such an effort.

If New England is to take up the making of fine cotton fabrics, her mill owners must be in a position to command the skill, the brains and the ingenuity of the best class of textile workers. This they cannot do under present conditions, and with such employees as in most places are now being attracted to the mills. The most successful mills in New England to-day are the ones that pay the highest wages, and give the best conditions. We need have no fear from either southern competition, or competition from any other quarter, providing conditions are made such as to attract to our mills those who for a few years back have been driven in the opposite direction. It is a mistake for employers to imagine that long hours, low wages and child labor are essential for the successful maintenance of any industry. Massachusetts worked under a fifty-eight-hour law for fifteen years against the competition of every other New England state, working sixty hours or more. Nevertheless, during that period, the textile industry continued to grow and prosper in every part of the state. The very best class of help was attracted there, and always will be while she keeps in the lead. Let the other states take example from her, as many of them have already done. Let the good work go on, raise the wage standard to the highest possible basis; shorten the hours of labor in proportion to the tremendous increase in the speed of machinery; take

the children out of the mills and place them in the schools and the playgrounds. Make the industry one where the young man of to-day can look forward to the future, so that when the duty of being the "breadwinner" of a family devolves upon him, he will feel assured that by remaining in the cotton mill, he will at all times be able to live in a comfortable home, to feed and clothe his wife, to rear and educate his children according to American ideals, and to put a little away, so that when his labors are done he will not be dependent upon others for either charity or support. If any industry, or any portion of an industry, does not make for this end, I believe we are better off without it than with it, and the sooner it leaves us the better. While it continues to maintain any other standard it is a menace to all our ideals of American citizenship.